

[Jaydy Asbin]

25983

February 15, 1938

J. B. and Birdie Lee Atkins (real names)

Municipal Trailer Camp

Tampa, Florida

Lindsay K. Bryan, writer

unedited [???

“JAYDY” ABBIN

FLORIDA ADVENTURE

On the ragged fringe of the trailer camp an aged and battered flivver coughed and whoosed to a stop. It settled dejectedly in the sand, with flabby tires and drooping fenders. Attached to its rear was a small home-made house trailer, or more accurately, a rough tin shanty on wheels.

The driver, an angular and weathered-beat on man of perhaps 35, in faded blue overalls, got out of the car and peered here and there under its bottom. Suddenly his long frame straightened so with alacrity. He shook a mop of sandy hair out of his eyes, threw back his head, and gave lusty [voat?] to the peculiar, half-yodling “hoy-o-o-o-pee.” yell of the Florida cowboy.

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Then, gazing into far space, he song off-key in a robust but [adenoidal?] tonor: "I's a-goin down to Tampa town With money in [our?] britches, A pint o' likker on each [hip?]- Look out, you [sons-o-witches?] "Fer I's a wild-eyed fightin fool, an [??] gonna raise some h—I. I's rootin, tootin, cuttin, shootin Cowboy from La Belle.

The [lilting] ditty was sung to a tune something like that of "Dixie."

Intrigued by the picture and sound effects, the questing writer sniffed a possible story and approached the scene. As he drew near a woman's voice from inside the trailer quavered in mild rebuke of the singer[. ?]

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"Jaydy, you hush up singin that nasty song. Fokes all think we're Yankees."

Jaydy cut short his melody, and grinned amiably as the prowling scribe greeted him and revealed that he was looking for life histories for a book about southern people.

"Well I declare!" the trailer its used. "So you write stuff to print in books. Well, well: That seems like a [carus?] kind-a trade to work at. I never thought uv a body follerin that for a livin. I read a book [wunst?]. Hit wuz about a man named Robinson [Crusoe?]. That feller shore had his sef a time on that island." He laughed and went on:

"Well, I aint fitten to go in no book, but I wuz born an raised a Floridy Cracker. Mostly in the woods and swamps. But I ben up Nawth sense last June. Jist got back this fur, thank the good Lord. I's a-headin fur Lee County. My name! Hit's J. D. Abbin."

He was asked what the initials J. D. stood for, and replied firmly:

"That's my whole front name, jist J. D. But people calls me Jaydy for short. Just my maw one time when I wuz a did if J. D. meant some other name. But she said no, she named

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me jist that, after he uncle, J.D. Stokes, [anche?] never had no other name. A right many fellers in

Floridy's named jist with letters thataway."

"What did you do up North?" the history-[housed?] queried, as he accepted Jaydy's invitation to 'set down' beside him on the rickety running board.

"[Be?] an the ole woman went off up yonder to [bee?]-trait to git me a job in Ole Ham Ford's factory, me bein a jack-leg mechanic fun workin round [cars?] an sawmills. Well, I gotta job [nuttin?] fur bout six months, but got laid off in Dee-cember. So I built us this little ole

[piece-a?] trailer, and we lit a [shuck?] for Floridy."

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The story-hunrr suggested the trip north must have been a great experience for Jaydy, and asked him how he liked it. He drawled:

"We kinda liked some uv it. But if I'd a-staid up there I'd a-had to kill a whole passal o' niggers. Then Yankee niggers haint gotta bitta manners. [Thy?], the black sons-o-buzzards all set right down by a white man, in a street car or any place. I got arrested twice up there for kickin the tar outa niggers."

Asked what he had worked at in Florida, Jaydy pondered, as he took a knife from his pocket, whetted the long blade on his shoe and began whittling a pine stick: "[An?], I reckon I've done near about everthing. Never wuz no hand for settlin down for long in one place. I spose that's why I always ben pore. But by gravy I've had a [heap-o?] fun in my time," he chuckled, his blue eyes twinkling[reminiscently?].

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"Tell me about your life. I'll bet you've had a lot of adventures," wheedled the biography-[beagle?].

"Well, "he cackled again, "if you aim to putt me in a book I better leave out a lotta things I done, or they'll chunk me in the jail house and [throw?] the key away. But if you don't print my right name hit'll be all right." This was promised, and he continued[:?]

"When I was jist a yearlin boy about 10 my famly moved [fum be Soter?] County to [Hannertes?] (Manatee) County. Up to then we'd ben raisin a few hawgs and cows and doin a little farmin an stillin in De [Soter?] and Glades County, on shares, mostly.

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"In Mannertee County we herded cows a while, then went sharecroppin down on Sawgrass Slough, back Bradentown. Raisin tomaters an celery, mostly. But evertime we'd gitta crop good started, seemed like, they'd come a freeze, or drouth, or blight, or bugs, or sumpun, and kill out near about everthing you had.

"Parta our twenty acres was pee-yore [nuck?], so deep an soft an dry you could stick a hoe hannel down in it clean up to the hoe. One fall hit caught a-fire when some cow men set fire to the woods, and it tuck us two days an nights to cuten it. We had to tote water in buckets fum the well, bout a quarter away.

"Hit burnt mighty nigh a acre, plus down to hard pan, on the twenty nex to ourn, where ole Jim Rolls was farmin. We holp him to cuten his, an he help us, but it tuck us an all our famlies to keep it fum spreadin any funder.

"Well, we couldn't hardly make our seed and fertilize a-farmin. So paw an me set us up a little still down in the big hammock and went to makin shine. We done right good at that, sellin to bootleggers in Bradentown an Tampa, but it tuck most all we made to pay off the prohibition agents for lettin us run.

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"After we'd ben there bout two years maw died with playgry [(pellagra)?]. Then paw, the ole billy-goat, went and married a neighbor gal ony 14 years old—jist a little fryin-size biddy, thout no more sense an a [pond?] gannet. An paw goin on 50 year old! He traded her daddy six hawgs an ten gallon-a shine fer the pesky brat. After they got married he brung her home to live with us in our ole shack.

"Me an Dery—that wuz my sister, a year youngern me an the ony other youngun left—we fussed a plenty at paw for doin such a fool thing, but he wouldn't pay us no mind.

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"One time I come home fum takin a load shine to town, and when I got to the house I heard a scufflin and a screechin inside. I run in, and there was that little huzzy a-beatin on Dory with a [tomater?] [stumb?]-an Dory too skairt to fight back.

"I was so mad I jist turnt her over muh knee an spanked her beehind till she hollered like a stuck pig. Paw heard er and [come?] a-runnin in fum the stable. Then he seen what I wuz doin he retch up on a shelf for his pistol and tried to shoot me. But I'd done shot up all his [?] shootin at snakes, so he turnt to an started to [gimme?] a pistol-snuppin.

"I fit him back a while, and I reckon I might coulda whupped him; but I jist hauled off an knocked him out with a jolt on the jaw. When me and Dory gethered up our close an other [plunder?] in a [aragus?] sack, and we left home for good.

"I shore hated to go off fum there, cause I was a-cutin a nice little gal named Birdie Lee Rodgers over acrost the slough. Her daddy had got religion at a Holy Roller [section?], and he said I wuz too no-count fer her. He'd done run me off his place with a shotgun, but me and her kep meetin in the woods right on till I left.

"Well, me an Dory walked all the way to [Spadantown?] that night an staid with kin fokes. I knowed a [boat?] cap's there that wuz rannin likker in fum Cuby, and he [gimme?] a job

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on his boat; mostly loadin and unloadin hams (sacks) [uv?] likker, an [arstania?] onion [a-lookin?] out for [guvaint?] boats.

[We?] has us a good fast gas cruiser, and we run ony at night, thout lights. But sometimes [them?] coast [gucruers ad?] pick us up with their search lights, an then they'd [?] away at us with their machine guns an little ole cannons. One night a thee-inch shell went smack [thew?] our cabin, an 6 missed my bunk ony bout a foot. But they never ketched us. I did git pistol-bit one time when we wuz fixin to land some booze an a depty sheriff shot at us — jist a 38 slug thew muh laig.

“Cap's Bob paid me good money, but I spent it fast on wimen an gamblin. (Here Jaydy lowered his voice cautiously and cast a wary eye toward the trailer, from whence came the clatter of dishwashing and a woman's low voice humming contentedly).

“Them Cuban wimen is shore not [?],” he whispered enthusiastically. “They'll either love you to death, or stick a knife in you if you make em jealous. I reckoleck one little [Spanish?] gal I had in [Navather?]—But shucks, I better not tell that.” And Jady chortled and winked [roguishly?].

“Sometimes when likker wuz scared in Havanner we'd snuggle a loada Chinyman over on a dark night an putt on ashore at some lonesome place on the Floridy coast. One night we fetched over eleven head uv [?] at \$200 a head. We putt em off jist afore day down on Lemon [Hay?]. Cap's Bob wouldn't go no closter to shore's bout half a mile, cause the water wuz shaller. He [made?] them pore Chinks jump overboard an wade ashore in about five foot-a water. They wuz a big movin van waitin fer em on shore to take em to [?]. Hits a wonder some uv em didn't git drowned.

“I wrote a couple times to Birdie Lee whilst I wuz beatin, but never got no hearin fum er, so I figgered on musta quit likin me, or either her daddy got the letters an never give em to er.

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“One time we tied our boat up at Fort Myers fora coupla days to git the engine fixed, an I decided to hop a train an go up to see Birdie Lee. But goin up town I met a bootlegger I knowed, as he tole me they wuz a warrant out for Cap's Bob. I got skairt they might want me too, so I high-tailed 7 right outa there, an hitch-hiked to Marco.

“There I run into Virgin White, a feller I usta [cow-bust?] with. Virgin was a regle ole woods rat. He wuz fixin to go down in the Everglades a—trappin, an he ast me to go in with him. I had around [\$60?] on me, so I help him buy the traps an rations an a tent, an we lit out fer Big Cypress Swamp. I figgered that was a good place to hide out if they had a warrant for me.

“Varmints was plenty that winter, an we got a lotta [hidea—?] otter, deer, skunk, gator, bear, an one big panther. By spring we had about \$400 [wuth?].

“We went to Miami an sold em. My share wuz [\$197?], an I felt perty rich with all that money burnin a hole in muh britches pocket. But I hadn't had no fum fer the longest, so I started out lookin fer wimmen an likker, an a little gamblin. Well, I found plenty-a all uv [?]—specially a big crap game. [I be?] John Brunned if I could win a bet in that game, an by [?] I wuz [?], plum broke.

The Florida adventurer laughed ruefully as he paused and leaned over to pick up a fresh piece of whittling timber. The back of his [?] neck presented a fascinating study, with its crimson and deepley [?] skin, caked in diamond-shaped patterns like red alligator skin. Such necks are frequent among rural Floridians who have lived much of their lives exposed to the sun, wind and weather.

From the trailor now came busy sounds of sweeping, and the woman's rather sweet voice was lifted in an old church hymn.

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Jaydy continued to reflect as he spat out a [quid] the size of a golf ball and took a fresh chew from a thick plug. Then he resumed his story.

“Well, I decided Miami wuzzent no place for a pond hopper like me, as I hit the hard road a-walkin nawth. I soon thumbed a ride with a feller on 8 a furniture truck goin to Lakeland. But we broke a axle some place in the woods in Folk County, an I started walkin ahead to calla garage man to tow him in. I phoned fer one fum a [fillin?] station, as then kep on walkin west.

“Goin thew the flatwoods a ole Ford coop ketched up with me, an drivin it wuz a skinny red-headed woman bout 40 years old. I thumbed er fore I seen she wuz a woman, but she stopped an picked me up any how. We got talkin, an I tole er I wuz lookin fer a job. She said she wuz a widdor woman with a 80-acre farm, an needed a man to help run it. Said her ole man had up an died on er a year back, an left er the farm an a flock-a kids, an forty head-a cattle, an she didn't know how many hangs a-runnin the woods. She'd been to town after rations an [? cawn]; an ast me [could?] I hiro out to her.

“I tole er I didn't love farmin a-tall, workin fum [hin?] till [can't?] an a-livin on grits an hawg's vest with the buttons on (“cow belly”).

Asked what was meany by “from [hin?] till can't,” Jaydy explained it meant “fum the time you kin [soe?] in the mawnin till you can't see at night,” and proceeded:

“But she lent over agin me kinda clost, an said if I'd come an work fer her I wouldn't hafta work moren eight hours a day, an she'd gimme [\$30?] a month an board, with plenty ham, an chicken, an pie, an anything else I wanted. I reckoned she musta ben kinda bad off fer a man any [noe?], the way she kept snugglin up to me in the seat, an me ugly as a skint buzzard.

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“She wuz a homely ole varmit her sef, with her buck teeth, an long nose, an freckly neck. But by then I wuz so dad-blamed hongry my belly wuz growin fast to muh backbone, an me broke as a jaybird. So I tole er I'd hire out to er fer a while, an maybe longer.

“By good dusk we got to her farm, bout a mile back fum the road in a 9 hammock. She had a good house an stable, with a mule, an plenty chickens an some hawgs an cows in the yard pens. So I thought I might could stan it a while, any how.

“As we pulled up to the porch there wuz a [scroochin?], an out poured five head-a younguns, all sizes fum knee-high to a saplin boy about 10—an all their heads so red you coulda lit a cigarette on em. When they seen me they all run behind the house an pecked at me fum around the corners, skairt like. But I started makin funny faces at em, an dancin a jig, an they soon made up with me.

“Well, the ole gal tuck me in an fed me up and bedded me down, an I wuz treated like a rich uncle fum then on. After bouta week eatin good vittles an bein [?] a plenty, I sez to mysef, sez I[:?] “Well, old double-ugly, looks like you done won yo'sef a home, an a famly to boot.

But, thinks I, this lady's shore-nuff hard up fer a man, takin the likes-a me to raise.’

“Things rocked along thataway thee-four weeks. But fore long I got to messin up with another gal down the road apiece. Carried her to a peanut bilin an a coupla frolics, an sich like. But when the widder found it out she started rompin on me an pesterin me to marry her. Well, I looked at them buck teeth, an them spindly laigs, an thoughts that litter a-kids, an tole er I wuzzent no marryin man. [Made?] but like I already had a wife in [?].

“But she kep ding-dongin me right on, an said if I'd marry her she'd gimme half the farm an stock, an a hunnerd dollars to boot. I felt right sorry fer the ole dame, but couldn't stummick marryin her. I even swore I had T. B., the ketchin kind, an tole er all my famly went crazy

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soon as they got married, an had to be sent to Chattyhoochy. But nuthin I said fazed her. I declare, she wuz the hell-bentist woman on gittin married I ever seen.

“Finally she kep hen-peckin me till I got to whur I wuz plum fed up, an couldn't stan it no longer. So one day I drove her ole flivver to town, makin 10 out I wuz goin for scratch feed, an left the car there an tuck a train fer Fort [Meade?]. I'd already drawed a month's wagon, an she owed me some more, but I never ast her fer it.

“Back-a Fort Meade I gotta job woods-ridin for a teppentine camp, an stuck at that bout a year, kinda hidin out agin. When I putt in a year er two [?]; worked as guard on a chain gang; made shine fer bout a year; cow-hunted some, an done a lotta other things till 1936.

“Then I heard they wuz makin big money raisin tuck down in Lee County, so I went down there an rented me a piece-a land an putt in a crop uv tomaters an beans. That year I shore made mysef a killin. Cleaned up \$2,000 cash money.

“Then I met a nize old gal I'd knowed when we wuz youngsters. She wuz a-visitin some fokes clost to my farm. Well, we found out we liked each other right much yit, so we got married an kep on farmin fer a while. I still got her, an a little money, so we aint so frightnin bad off.

She's got religion—the Holy Roller kind, an she's shore a good woman. She's even got me readin the Bible a right smart, too.

“Next we're a-goin back to Lee County and drive round till we find a little farm at jist suits us. Then I'll buy it an settle down—maybe.

At this point the trailer door opened and a neat, pleasant-faced little woman with graying bobbed hair leaned out. She placed two spread fingers across her mouth, pursed her lips and squirted out a hissing stream of snuff juice that hit the ground with a smack. Then she saw us, blushed, and smiled a little sheepishly.

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"Hey, old woman," Jaydy cackled, "this [genman's?] a book writer by trade, an he's puttin me in a book. Whaddya think a-that!"

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"Pleased to meet you," she nodded and smiled, "but I hope you won't putt me in yer book too, with this ole raggedy frock on. I aint had time to do no washin sence we left [Dee-troit?]."

The dress wuz neat, clean and pretty, if a little faded. The writer asked: "Are you glad to get back to Florida, Mrs. [Abbin?]?"

"I shore am proud to be in Floridy agin. I wuz raised heah, an so wuz all my kin people. If I'd-a had my [crtorns?] we wouldn't a-went off up there. I druther a-staid down here. But Jaydy wanted to go." Her brown eyes beamed on him, as she continued[:?]

"I met some mighty nice fokes up there, but their vittles aint fitten to eat. Why, them Yankee storekeepers don't even know what grits is, ner turnip greens, ner [haslet?]. I's a-cookin a mess-a haslet now. Jady loves it too."

(Haslet, it was explained, consists of the lungs and liver of a hog, made into a kind of stew).

After a little further conversation, the caller said goodbye to the couple, and was cordially invited to "come back," and to visit them on their farm when they got settled. She walked away, Jaydy called after him:

"[Say?], misto, I aimed to tell you but I forgot—This here's that Birdie Lee I wuz tellin you bout."

He patted her arm and grinned proudly.

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AUTHOR's NOTE.—In twenty years of frequent contact with rural natives of Florida, the writer has observed that they are far from consistent in their use of native peculiarities of speech. This is probably due to most of them having associated for periods with northern people and with better educated Floridians.

For example, a “Cracker” will sometimes say “hit” for “it,” and at other times pronounce the word correctly. Also, he may either articulate his r's or slur them in using the same words at different times. He may at times say “muh” or “mah” for “my,” or use the word correctly. The same inconstancy prevails in the use of all other words and phrases. Therefore, the inconsistencies of speech in “Jaydy's” recital as chronicled here should be attributed to literal recording instead of careless writing.